

## **BECOMING A COUNCILLOR – Brief Overview**

### **COUNCILLORS**

If you are a councillor, you are over 18 and a qualifying citizen of the Commonwealth, the European Community or the Republic of Ireland.

You are one of over 80,000 local councillors in England. You will be held accountable by local people for things that happen locally.

So why get involved?

You almost certainly want to do something positive and, like most councillors, you hope to make a difference by influencing decisions that affect your community.

Parish Councillors are independent of party affiliations, who work together in the council to serve your community. Your task is to bring local issues to the attention of the council, and help it make decisions on behalf of the local community.

As a councillor you have a responsibility to:

- attend meetings; the notice to attend a council meeting is, in law, a summons, because you have a duty to attend;
- consider, in advance of the meeting, the agenda and any related documents which were sent to you;
- take part in meetings and consider all the relevant facts and issues on matters which require a decision including the views of others expressed at the meeting;
- take part in voting and respect decisions made by the majority of those present and voting;
- ensure, with other councillors, that the council is properly managed;
- represent the whole electorate, and not just those who voted for you.

### **CO-OPTION**

The council chooses someone to fill a vacancy if insufficient candidates are proposed for seats at an election. An ordinary election occurs every four years (next one due in May 2019) but there may be an election when a seat falls vacant at other times. In addition, if a vacancy occurs between elections (for example, by the resignation of a councillor), the council must generally publicly notify the vacancy and if no poll is claimed co-opt. It is better for democracy if councillors are elected

rather than relying on co-option, so they can be confident that the council is the community's choice of representatives.

## **THE COUNCIL**

Your council is a corporate body, a legal entity separate from that of its members (councillors). Its decisions are the responsibility of the whole body. The council has been granted powers by Parliament including the important authority to raise money through taxation (the precept) and a range of powers to spend public money (more later).

The job of your council is to represent the interests of the whole community. Occasionally there will be a conflict of interest requiring sensitive judgement; for example, dog owners, parents of young children and walkers might disagree about use of the village green. Making difficult decisions, in an open and reasoned way, is something that local councils need to do well.

## **WHERE ARE YOU HEADING?**

Your council is an elected body in the first tier of local government. Other tiers, known as principal councils or authorities (like Milton Keynes Council), have many legal duties to deliver services such as education, housing, town and country planning, transport, environmental health and social services. Local parish and town councils have the legal power to take action, but they have very few duties and greater freedom to choose what action to take. They can play a vital part in representing the interests of the communities they serve and improving the quality of life and the local environment. Furthermore, they influence other decision makers and can, in many cases, deliver services to meet local needs. In other words, you and your council can make a difference.

## **WHAT CAN YOUR COUNCIL DO?**

Community safety, housing, street lighting, allotments, cemeteries, playing fields, community centres, litter, war memorials, seats and shelters, rights of way and some aspects of planning and highways – these are some of the issues that concern parish government.

Central Government is encouraging local councils to deliver more services and play a greater part in their communities. For example, your council could provide or give financial support for:

- an evening bus taking people to the nearest town;
- affordable housing to rent;
- pond clearing;
- redecorating the community centre;
- a teenagers' drop-in club;
- a summer festival;
- equipment for a children's activity group;
- transport to hospital.

Projects like these may be a challenge and need hard work and commitment – but they are achievable. Of course, your council could always decide to do very little; but local residents might then wonder why the local council exists at all.

### **DIVERSITY IS A STRENGTH**

There are around 9,000 local councils in England and they are growing in number, especially as councils in urban areas are established. Most local councils were set up in 1894 by an Act of Parliament. This created the civil parish, separating it from the church after its long history of delivering local services such as care for the poor, maintenance of roads and collecting taxes. In 2007, the Government brought in legislation to allow local councils in London, not permitted since the 1960s. The first local council in London, Queen's Park, was approved in 2012 and came into being in 2014. In the first decade of the 21st century around 200 new councils were created. A typical local council represents around 2,700 people but some have much larger populations. Shrewsbury Town Council, created in 2009, serves over 72,000 people, which is more than some small counties. These considerable differences are reflected in annual spending which might range from under £1000 to £4 million. It is important that you know how much your council spends each year. In 2014/15 local councils raised £445 million in council tax and spent over £500 million.

The diversity of local councils is their strength. Each can make a unique response to the needs of their community with a sensitivity that is more difficult for principal authorities to achieve.

Milton Keynes Council is our borough council (political affiliation(s)) and there are 48 Parish & Town Councils within Milton Keynes who are predominantly non-political and serve their communities at a more local level.

### **PULLING TOGETHER**

Diversity often arises because councillors have different backgrounds, enthusiasms and interests. We should celebrate this. Councillors have different skills and attitudes; for example, some work with ideas while others are very practical; some like accounts while others prefer reports. The local council needs a range of skills to work as a team.

Your Chair has the role of team leader for council meetings, while your Clerk is also a vital team member. The Clerk provides advice and administrative support, and takes action to implement council decisions. The Clerk may have to act as a project manager, personnel director, public relations officer or finance administrator. The Clerk is not a secretary and is not at the beck and call of the Chair or other councillors; the Clerk is answerable only to the council as a whole. The Clerk is the proper officer of the council in law. Legally councils can delegate decisions to Clerks because they are trusted professional officers whose objectivity allows them to act for the council.

The best councils will have a Clerk (officer) and Councillors (members) who work as a team to provide a service for the community.

**A corporate body** has a legal existence separate from that of its members. It can own land, enter into contracts and be subject to court proceedings. It is responsible for its actions as a body.

**Delegation** is the act of authorising an officer, a committee, a sub-committee or another council to make a decision on the council's behalf. Delegation must be formally agreed by the full council.

**Duties** are legal obligations – actions that a council must take by law. Powers are contained in legislation and permit actions to be taken at the council's discretion.

**The precept** is the local council's share of the council tax. The precept demand goes to the billing authority (the district council or equivalent) which collects the tax for the local council.

**Principal councils or authorities** are other local government bodies, including county councils, district, borough or city councils, metropolitan and unitary councils.

**Proper officer** is a term used in legislation to mean the officer assigned to a particular task. In local councils this officer is normally the clerk.

For a more in-depth understanding, residents who are thinking about becoming a Parish Councillor should come to our monthly meetings, where all members of the public are allowed. This will give you a better idea on how council operates, debates, discusses, votes and deals with various topics on local issues.

Due to year on year Central Government cuts, Milton Keynes Council are focusing more on things like housing, homelessness, social care and starting to devolve more of the day to day services to Parish/Town Councils to deliver. Our Parish Council is starting with devolved landscaping from 2020.

Look on our website [www.broughtonandmkv-pc.gov.uk](http://www.broughtonandmkv-pc.gov.uk) for our monthly meeting dates, which include both agendas and minutes of previous meeting.

Please refer to our Co-option policy for further information or feel free to contact Vicky Mote (Clerk) to chat further, or come into our offices and see the scope of the parish we serve and what we current do.

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